



"I want you to feel younger and younger and let me teach you to dance."

# THE SCREEN

Drawing by Arthur E. Becher

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## CHAPTER X

**H**AMAR'S Conal is wishing to speak with her Ladyship on something important," Douglas contrived to say privately to Annira that evening, just as she and Daura, with Vane Erskine, left the men after dinner.

Hamar himself had not long been gone, with his pipes, and it was strange that Conal should have come to the castle in the evening; stranger still that he should be asking for Lady Annira. But everything was strange and terrible today. It seemed to Nira that she had borne all that she could bear. If Daura had not implored her to do so, she would not have dined with the family; but Daura made a great point of her meeting the man who had come to see George, and had even been oddly anxious that she should look her best and most beautiful,—pale and pathetic, of course, all the better; but her very loveliest, in a simple white dress, her hair done in a fashion called by Daura "the Madonna way." For the first time Nira hated her own beauty, because George, dreamy and half conscious, could not wake enough to care for it.

But Conal the peasant-poet cared. His eyes lighted at sight of Lady Annira, with the wonderful, almost unearthly light of a tragic love, as she came into the red boudoir, where she had told Douglas to send him. He

was on his feet waiting for her; but there was nothing servile, nothing of humility, in his bearing. On the contrary, there was the fierce pride of a spirit conscious of something in himself that lifts him above class distinctions, and furiously demands recognition of his worth. Conal felt himself, as a man, created by God to be the equal even of Lady Annira Score; and tonight the thought that Fate had stepped between her and her lover seemed to bring him—Conal MacFingon the poet—nearer to her than he had ever been.

He could hardly control himself as the white figure floated into the room, spiritlike against the faded crimson of the walls; and because of a secret thing he had done that day his superstitious soul assured him that it was he—he, and no other—who had stopped the marriage. If it had not been for the son of Hamar the piper, by this time the woman he loved would have been in her husband's arms, or so Conal told himself. A rage of joy ran through his veins like fire. It took all he had of self-restraint not to fall on his knees before the girl, snatching her white hands, raining kisses upon them, and pouring out words of love. Yet even while the yearning was strongest some strange demon in him laughed wildly to think how she would shrink away in horrified surprise, and order him to go, never to come again.

**W**HAT is it, Conal?" she asked in a weary voice, looking at the tall, handsome young peasant as she might have looked at a piece of furniture. "I know

it must be something really important, or you wouldn't have troubled me tonight, when I'm so unhappy and anxious."

"Troubled!" She thought nothing of the stab she gave, in letting Conal know that it was a "trouble" to see him. He keenly felt the pain; but bore her no grudge. The Queen could do no wrong!

There was a curious element in Conal's worship of Annira which he himself could not understand; though he knew it was there, and wondered at it. He loved her all the better, with a more agonizing love, every time she unconsciously hurt him. Tonight his spirit writhed, and ordered him to make her see him as a woman sees a man, to make her feel his genius and value his sympathy. Yet he did not know with what magic to bring about the miracle.

"Yes, Lady Annira," he answered, glorying pitifully in the one small privilege he had annexed for his own, that of addressing her as her equals did, and proud too that he had learned the accent of his "betters." "I have come for something important. At least, it seems important to me. If not, I wouldn't, as you say, have 'troubled' you tonight. I can explain in a few words; but first will you let me tell you that I—I—" He could not say he was sorry for the thing that had happened: the lie would burn his lips. But Annira thought she understood.

"I know what you want to say," she caught him up kindly. "Thank you, Conal. Everyone is very good. And